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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: AN-NAHDHA LEADER JEBALI: MODERATE ISLAMISM IS THE
FUTURE

REF: A. TUNIS 670

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 2065
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 2155
- [1](#)D. 05 TUNIS 1423
- [1](#)E. 91 TUNIS 4553

Classified By: CDA David Ballard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary: In an August 30 meeting, Hamadi Jebali, a former leader of the unauthorized Tunisian Islamist political party An-Nahdha, described the party's political views, continued GOT oppression, his recent release from prison, and defended "moderate Islamism" as the political future of Tunisia and the Arab World. Jebali defended An-Nahdha's "non-violent philosophy", contrasting it with the more radical philosophies of young Tunisian Islamists. He said that An-Nahdha sought to be "a part of the dialogue" in Tunisia, a message that was communicated in a letter to President Ben Ali by nine former An-Nahdha leaders, but that currently the country suffered from a "suffocating lack of freedoms." End Summary.

Background on Jebali

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Poloff met with former An-Nahdha leader Hamadi Jebali on August 31 at his home in the coastal city of Sousse. Jebali has been in internal exile in Sousse following his release from prison in February 2006, and is reportedly not allowed to travel outside of the Sousse governorate. Jebali was sentenced in 1992 to sixteen years in prison for his alleged participation in what the GOT described as an "attempted overthrow" of the Government. He had previously been imprisoned several times, beginning in 1990, on charges related to his role as publisher and editor of Al-Fajr, the official newspaper of An-Nahdha. According to Jebali, he spent eleven years of his prison sentence in restricted conditions, either in solitary confinement or with other political prisoners separated from the general prison population. Jebali is a engineer by training, specializing in solar energy. He received his master's degree in engineering from the University of Paris, France, where he lived for nine years before returning to Tunisia in 1981. According to Jebali, it was at this time that he became politically active with the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI, the precursor to An-Nahdha), having become increasingly involved in Islamist and Islamic studies circles in France.

[1](#)3. (C/NF) Poloff spoke with Jebali for over two hours. Jebali was warmly welcoming, articulate, lively, and largely focused on Tunisian issues. Uncharacteristically of civil

society and opposition contacts, he did not take the rare occasion of a meeting with a U.S. official to complain about U.S. actions or policy in Lebanon, Israel, or Iraq, except to say, when asked, that the USG "had not understood the complexity of Iraqi society."

An-Nahdha Structure

¶4. (C/NF) Jebali described An-Nahdha as separated in three sections: former party leaders and adherents living in Tunisia, those in Europe, and those still serving sentences in Tunisian prisons. He described An-Nahdha in Tunisia and An-Nahdha in Europe as "one in the same." He categorically stated that he and his fellow An-Nahdha leaders in Tunisia recognized that Rachid Ghannouchi, currently living in exile in London, is the leader of An-Nahdha. He claimed that "Ghannouchi belongs in Tunisia, and his exile is a great loss to the country."

An-Nahdha's Political Views

¶5. (C/NF) In response to a question about the political and social policies of An-Nahdha's form of Islamism, Jebali related an anecdote from the 1989 legislative elections, when An-Nahdha ran and, according to Jebali, won a majority of the national vote, despite the official GOT announcement that the Islamist party had garnered only 12 percent of votes cast. Jebali said that a few days after the election, a journalist from the French newspaper Le Monde said that he had learned (Jebali believed from French Embassy sources) that An-Nahdha had actually won the election, with over 60 percent of the vote. The journalist asked Jebali what he and the party

would do next. According to Jebali, An-Nahdha was completely unprepared for a victory. He said that the party had no desire to run the country, that it was inexperienced and incapable of governing on its own. Jebali said that days after the election, the GOT declared that An-Nahdha had won only 25 percent of the vote, and "on that day decided that they would wipe out An-Nahdha". (NOTE: Although Jebali cited 25 percent as the official vote tally for An-Nahdha, international media cited 12 percent as the official figure, and most accounts place the total between 15 and 30 percent. END NOTE).

¶6. (C/NF) Jebali said that this anecdote revealed the group's motivations in that An-Nahdha would have sought, and still wanted, a progressive entry into Tunisian politics, where the group would share power as part of a consultative process. He stated that An-Nahdha had not had as its goal an Islamic Republic, nor did it want a coup d'etat: "How could we maintain our economic ties with Europe after a coup," Jebali asked. When asked if An-Nahdha advocated Shari'a law, he said no, and that he had recently replied in the same manner during an interview for London-based Pan-Arab newspaper Al-Hayat, a response which he said "the Saudis were not happy with" (NFI). He said ideologies shouldn't be implied by force, that regimes that imposed their will by force were weak, and would be toppled at the earliest opportunity by those they governed. Jebali said that "there is a problem" in other Islamic parties where "everyone believes they have the divine truth, and no one accepts criticism." Jebali said there is a truth, but it's not he or his fellow politician's role to give it: "In the social and political world, we are just one party like the others."

¶7. (C/NF) When confronted that what he was describing sounded like a secular government, he said that decisions he made would be influenced by personal convictions of Islam. He said he separated his practice of religion, including prayers, from that of his role in the public arena, "outside of personal life", where he is "one of many" and subject to criticism. He said that most moderate Islamists think like that, and that this was more the case now than in previous

decades, when groups "didn't talk to Communists, didn't accept pluralism". Now, he said, "you can see Muslim Brotherhood collaborating with other groups." He said that beyond Shari'a, the overall idea of Islam is "justice, freedom, and peace." He said the example of pluralism in Turkey, including Islamist parties, should be held up by the USG. He finished by reasserting that "the Tunisian Government knows very well that we are moderate, that we are not radical -- not terrorists."

18. (C/NF) Jebali said that An-Nahdha was against using violence. When asked about terrorist attacks on Tunisian hotels in 1987 attributed by the GOT to An-Nahdha, Jebali confirmed that the perpetrators were indeed "sympathizers of An-Nahdha," but were not tied to the movement's leadership. Jebali asserted that the GOT had tried to link the attackers with An-Nahdha leadership and attempted to coerce confessions of a link from the detained attackers, offering legal incentives such as reduced sentences, to no avail. Jebali said that if An-Nahdha was truly a terrorist organization, its leaders would not have remained in prison 15 years without a single terrorist attack organized in an attempt to free them. When asked about the GOT charge that An-Nahdha leaders had plotted a coup d'etat in the early 90s, Jebali again gave an excited denial of such a goal: "How could we carry out a coup? Within days the French Army, the Algerian Army, and the (U.S.) 6th Fleet would be in Tunisia. A coup would not last 24 hours!" Jebali also denied that An-Nahdha members either in Tunisia or abroad had links to active terrorist organizations. He said the GOT would like nothing more than to find such a link to prove that An-Nahdha was in fact a terrorist organization. "They have spent all their resources trying to find this link and have not found one piece of evidence," he commented.

GOT Measures Against An-Nahdha

19. (C/NF) Jebali described a stifling political environment in Tunisia. He said "all Tunisians, especially those who act out politically against the government, are in a prison," where they are not allowed to express themselves or associate freely. Jebali commented that after his release, he had moved "from a small prison, to a large one." He reported that the GOT prevented him from working, or traveling, and that the same restrictions applied to his family. He explained that the GOT did not withdraw outright his work

permit, but said that if he were to open an office, the GOT would post police outside to question anyone seeking to do business with him, thus effectively preventing him from being employed. He added that his daughter had recently lost her job after the governor of Sousse called the CEO of her company, demanding that she be fired for her relation to Jebali. Jebali claimed that his house was filmed and watched by police. He said neither he nor his family can receive passports, and he is not permitted to travel outside the governorate of Sousse. (NOTE: Despite Jebali's claim of employment restrictions, his house in Sousse was large and well-furnished, and well-decorated. He spared no expense on hosting poloff either, with several rounds of food and drink. END NOTE)

10. (C/NF) Jebali said that fellow An-Nahdha leader Ali Laaridh has been convoked by Tunisia police six times since his release from prison in November 2004. Each time, according to Jebali, he is told to not "speak in the name of An-Nahdha" and not to be politically involved. Laaridh has reportedly been accused of speaking with An-Nahdha associates in Europe, and "each time he is called in" he has been threatened with being sent back to prison. Jebali said he himself has not been convoked, because he is not permitted to travel from Sousse, where he has little opportunity for political involvement. Jebali however said he faces an upcoming trial on a "false charge" from 2002 of bribing a prison guard to circumvent prison censors in delivering a letter to his wife. Jebali described this charge as a mechanism for the GOT to send him back to prison should he

become "too active."

¶11. (C/NF) Jebali said that on July 23, nine former An-Nahdha leaders wrote a letter to President Ben Ali saying that the group was "ready to turn the page", and seeking dialogue to organize "political life" for former An-Nahdha members. Jebali said that the group had received no response but that one of the signatories was convoked to a police station and interrogated as to how the group organized itself to draft and send the letter. Jebali added that "all problems in Tunisia are treated from a security point of view."

¶12. (C/NF) Jebali continued that there was a clear red line for An-Nahdha leaders: they could not present themselves as a political party, nor act in a political fashion. He said he was unclear where the USG stood on the issue of whether An-Nahdha should be allowed to be a political party. He said it is an error to think that An-Nahdha should not be authorized as a party, and that he felt that France, and perhaps the U.S., was comfortable treating An-Nahdha as a human rights concern, but not as a political concern.

"U.S. Faces a Dilemma"

¶13. (C/NF) Jebali said that the U.S. faced a dilemma in the Arab World: If Arab leaders allow democracy in their countries, they will fall, most likely being replaced by an Islamist power of some nature. This was a theme Jebali returned to often in the discussion. He said that the U.S. should reach out to moderate Islamist groups, which were the future of the Arab World. He cautioned that the USG and the West had supported Arab regimes for too long, and that with no moderate Islamist alternatives, young Islamists in Tunisia and elsewhere were expressing themselves through the only political option available: extremism. He said that this was evident from the number of young Tunisians traveling abroad to "wage jihad" in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Young Generation Not Able to Hear
An-Nahdha's Message of Moderation

¶14. (C/NF) As an example of the generational division among Tunisian Islamists, he recounted that while in prison he and fellow An-Nahdha prisoners had developed a friendly rapport with prison guards, talking, joking, and telling stories. Jebali said that when "young Islamists arrested for security reasons" began in recent years arriving at the prison in which he was detained, the guards complained that "they could not even talk to" the young Islamists. Jebali said these young Islamists "are of a completely different mindset", close-minded, prone to violence, and a product of GOT oppression and pan-Arab media. (NOTE: The dichotomy between "old Islamists" and "young Islamists" in Tunisia prisons has also been described by our ICRC interlocutors. See Ref D. END NOTE)

¶15. (C/NF) Jebali predicted that "the future of Tunisia is somber." He said that Tunisia had limited water, energy, and other natural resources, a young population, and huge demand for employment. He said that while the GOT "sells the idea that there is security and stability in Tunisia, this security is based on repression." He said Tunisia's path was to "wait for an explosion," and that to prevent such an explosion Tunisians had to be permitted more freedom of expression and association. Noting that free elections had brought Hamas to power in the Palestinian Territories, Jebali said that, to many young Arabs living under oppression, violence was the only option. Jebali again pointed to the divisions between the non-violent older generation of Islamists, and young Tunisian Islamists. He said that younger Tunisians, "even those close to me, for example my son-in-law," claim that An-Nahdha is "too moderate." Jebali conceded that the number of young Tunisians drawn to more radical forms of Islamism would be of concern if a free and fair election were to be held in Tunisia. Jebali said this had resulted from An-Nahdha's inability to promote its

moderate message.

Comment

¶16. (C/NF) Apart from the dire and frequent warnings from the GOT that An-Nahdha is a terrorist and extremist organization, many of our secular opposition and civil society contacts, themselves stridently anti-regime, also warn us "not to be fooled" by An-Nahdha's talk of moderation. Jebali, the most senior An-Nahdha official with whom we've met in recent years, indeed presented what he undoubtedly assumed to be a "West-friendly" description of An-Nahdha's politics -- no Shari'a law, democracy with full participation, etc. Jebali's insistence that more freedom of expression and freedom of association is necessary for Tunisia's long-term political development closely echoes our own Freedom Agenda goals in Tunisia. However, the question of whether An-Nahdha would continue to promote these moderate policies if they were an authorized participant in the Tunisian political process will not likely be answered anytime soon, as the GOT continues to block any attempt of the group to organize or participate politically. The GOT, cognizant of the political successes of Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood and faced with signs of increased religious practice among Tunisians, most visibly evident in a sharp increase in the number of Tunisian women wearing hijab, is undoubtedly concerned that an Islamist party competing in elections could gain a significantly greater share of the vote than the 15-30 percent An-Nahdha reportedly won in legislative elections in 1989, during a time of greater secularism in Tunisian society. End Comment.
BALLARD